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Shakespeare's Myriad-Minded Stage as a Transnational Forum:

Openness and Plurality in Drama Translation

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From fairest creatures we desire increase,

That thereby beauties Rose might neuer die

Sonnet 1.1

In 1997, Stephen Greenblatt observed in his introduction to *The Norton Shakespeare*: "The fantastic diffusion and long life of Shakespeare's works depends on their extraordinary malleability".¹ Two years later, Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer published in many ways a seminal essay collection *Shakespeare and Appropriation* that developed the theoretical propositions made by Jean I. Marsden in her *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: The Works and the Myth* (1991). Appropriation has been theorized, developed and exemplified on an impressive range of works across many cultures. In recent years, the concept has been also critiqued, modified and refined in an attempt at moving away from its original hegemonic sense as "an act of seizure" to a more complex model where "both Shakespeare and its appropriations can be the actors and the acted upon, the self and the other, sometimes in the space of a single creative act".² These recent developments, most importantly summarised in Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin's collection *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (2014), move beyond issues of fidelity, simple binary models of source-appropriation or questions of citation and quotation. In this context, Douglas Lanier asks radically: "How then to reconceptualize Shakespearean adaptation post-fidelity?".³ This essay contributes to this

discussion and offers a possible reconceptualization of works derived from Shakespeare in the broadest sense of the word – from translations, through adaptations, to real-time manifestations of the Shakespearean myth.

1 Beyond Appropriation

In his 2005 essay in *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, Graham Holderness problematizes the concept of appropriation:

Is the appropriated work still the same work amended, or an entirely new and different cultural construction? Is appropriation about exploiting the immanent potentialities of the classic work, or rather about foregrounding the struggle between the work and its appropriator?⁴

And he does conclude that “there is nothing other than appropriation”. However, the notion of *appropriation* is far from clear. To underpin his own approach to textual appropriations, Holderness relies on Jerome McGann’s 1991 book *The Textual Condition*:

The textual condition’s only immutable law is the law of change. [...] Every text enters the world under determinate sociohistorical conditions, and while these conditions may and should be variously defined and imagined, they establish the horizon within which the life histories of different texts can play themselves out. [...] To study texts and textualities, then, we have to study these complex (and open-ended) histories of textual change and variance.⁵

I believe this argumentation is based on an epistemological flaw: it assumes a material objectivity of a text, as if a text were an object as empirically verifiable and undoubted as a piece of wood, a knife or any other material thing. It is not, of course. The verifiability and the very solidity of a text is based on a social reality – as Romeo wittily points out:

Ser. [...] But I pray can you read any thing you see?

Rom. I, if I know the Letters and the Language. (*RJ* 1.2.61–62)

While the printed, engraved or handwritten words are objectively existent, their meaning is dependent on the existence and knowledge of the script and the language in their ever-changing social and cultural conditions. None of these is stable and ultimately objective.

There are a number of texts engraved or written down that haven't been deciphered for the lack of understanding the script or the language they are written in. Especially when it comes to translation, the semantic continuity of a text is profoundly troubled; while, for instance, a translation of *Hamlet* into Georgian may be done word for word and meaning for meaning – however unrealistic such a proposition may be – there is no material connection between the two. It has been established by the intellectual activity of the translator and the connection may be *recognized* and confirmed by those who “know the Letters and the Language”; at the same time, that connection is not *a priori* given and fixed. With that in mind it is important to reconsider Holderness's questions:

If a “work” can undergo an almost infinite process of textual transformation, how can we be sure it's the same “work”? At what point does textual variance produce not a mutation, but a new text? When dealing with “appropriations” of Shakespeare, since they are also the work of other writers, are we still dealing with Shakespeare?⁶

These questions are not only crucial but also problematic: What does Holderness mean by “work” – so appropriately problematized by quotation marks? And what does he mean by *Shakespeare* in this context – or for that matter by the identity of a text? These questions all the more complex when it comes to translation. What kind of identity of text or meaning *may* we assume or assert when it comes to translations?

M. J. Kidnie, in her acclaimed book *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (2009), elaborates on what is meant by the “work” and runs into a similar methodological and

theoretical problem, based on the problematic concept of *drama* as an art form – a consequence of the obstinate textuality of the approach. Kidnie asserts that:

The peculiar problems associated with an art form [i.e. drama] that exists simultaneously in two media – text and performance – are not infrequently glossed over, usually in favour of reading performance as an inherently adaptive strategy.⁷

This is somewhat syllogistic: drama is not an art form that exists in two media; the word is polysemic and refers to (1) dramatic literature, and to (2) theatre performance. W. B. Worthen speaks of “two very different institutions of drama, literature and theatre[; ...] reading and acting are different activities, and engage different ways of using writing”.⁸ (209, 211). These are two separate art forms (not media). The former is in the domain of literature and its material is chirographic: a text, words on a page. The latter is a real-time form and a social event, and its material is embodied presence. Each of the two art forms can be *mediated* through different *media*: a dramatic text can be printed, made available online, even read out (without a performative intention), while a theatre performance of a dramatic text can be realised in the theatre, live-broadcast, recorded audiovisually or only in a recording. or photographed. These are different mediation of two separate art forms. Although drama as dramatic literature and drama as theatre performance are closely interconnected, they are not identical – as was established by the founder of theatre semiotics Otakar Zich in his 1931 *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* and revisited later by Jiří Veltruský.⁹ Zich has argued convincingly that the two need to be separate; conflating the two would ignore the artistic value and contribution that actors, directors, scenographers and other members of the production team bring to the performance.

A dramatic work can only exist subjectively as a perception of an actual, concrete observation of a performance, where both the visual and the acoustic components can be perceived by senses. A necessary condition of a dramatic work’s existence is its actual

performance.¹⁰

Zich also draws a telling parallel: reading the score of an opera – a skill that only few people possess and that only to a very specific degree – has little in common with the experience of a performance of the opera.

Kidnie argues for the usage of the umbrella term *work*: “It is what enables one to speak of *King Lear* or *Pericles*, grouping under a generic title non-identical examples of text and performance that are somehow recognized as ‘the same’”.¹¹ This is an interesting point but one based on the *perception* and a personal recognition of what *King Lear* or *Pericles* is. (Cf. Christy Desmet’s elaborated concept of appropriation on the basis of *recognition*.)¹² That individual recognition, however, has to be separate from either the drama of *King Lear* or any performance of the play. The complexity of the issue is all the greater given the textual status of plays like *King Lear*. The play itself is now commonly recognized by critics to exist in several different textual versions, a view firmly asserted since Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells’ 1986 Oxford Shakespeare, which published the Quarto and Folio versions as separate revisions of the play – although the recent exchange of opinion in the *The Times Literary Supplement* throws some doubt on the critical consensus.¹³

Kidnie brings in an important aspect of appropriations and the existence of Shakespeare’s work – the cultural reception or *myth* of the works that not only perpetuate its existence but also define it:

The work thus emerges in history as that which its adaptations are not, and becomes known (at times controversially) by means of the reception afforded its productions.

[... T]here is no ideal iteration of any Shakespearean play towards which one can or should strive, either textually or theatrically. This is not to say that at any given moment it is impossible to identify texts and performances that are regarded as authentically Shakespearean; however, the production which today seems fully to

capture or embody a supposed original – and this is true whether one speaks of text or performance – enjoys only a potentially temporary and limited currency. Precisely what constitutes authentic Shakespeare is a question that can never finally be resolved since there is no *a priori* category that texts and stagings are productions of. [... It] is precisely through such processes of debate that users continue to define their particular ideological, institutional, or political investment in the work.¹⁴

Kidnie's approach manages to address the complex relativity and cultural conditionality of Shakespeare as existing in its numerous iterations. At the same time her somewhat circular argument fails to acknowledge temporal, culture-specific and ever-changing aesthetics that constructs meaning of an art work *differently* – some valuing the affects (or “passions”) in the play, others psychological verisimilitude, rhetoric or poetic qualities, or a political agenda; such receptions of the work are not *a priori* present in the Shakespearean text but only potentially available through the poetic, metaphoric or dramatic indeterminacy. The developing aesthetic taste restructures the hierarchy of components within an art work and also offers opportunities for looseness in dealing with a text – in result what some spectators with their cultural background would consider a faithful rendering, others would consider an adaptation departing from the “work”.

Christy Desmet has addressed the concept of appropriation and extended it crucially in several aspects. Most importantly her redefined term relegates the connections between a work and its adaptation into the social act of recognition – an active cognitive intervention on the reader's part, rather than assuming any pre-given, inherent connection encoded in a text, waiting to be uncovered and classified, “a dialogic concept of appropriation that is based on the act of *recognizing* Shakespeare in another writer or text”.¹⁵ Desmet also helps loosen the grip of literal textuality and argues for a rehabilitation of the metaphor and the metaphoricity of the text.¹⁶ Her argument is that a useful concept of appropriation is one based on

recognition of affinities, rooted in the dialogic nature of a text. These are significant points in refining our knowledge of what adaptation and appropriation are. At the same time, as a consequence of this redefined conceptualisation, it would be tempting to abandon the contentious term *appropriation* as no longer adequate. While Desmet is arguing for a new life of the term by adopting the prism of recognition, combining Bakhtinian dialogic imagination and Charles Taylor's pragmatic philosophy, this new sense is rather distant from what *appropriation* as a word represents semantically and incurs a socially constructed understanding of the work's autonomy. Both Desmet's and Kidnie's theories of Shakespearean appropriation and adaptation, respectively, result in an important consequence: the issue of a work's *identity* (as a Shakespearean play, as an adaptation or another form of appropriation) is a point secondary to the act of experiencing the work.

2 Cultural Translations and the Signature Moment

Writing in 1936, Jan Mukařovský, in his essay "Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value", argues for the instability of a work of art:

Firstly, an art work itself is not an unchanging value: with each shift in time, space or the social environment the current artistic tradition is changing; it is through its prism that an art work is perceived, and due to these shifts the aesthetic object itself changes too – that is in the social perception of the material artefact as created by the artist. So, although a certain work may be valued equally highly in two distant periods, it is always essentially a different aesthetic object that is evaluated – in certain ways a different work of art.¹⁷

The theoretical consequences of this radical notion are far-reaching. What Mukařovský argues is that the very art work is permanently changing: there are no two moments when a work of art remains the same. Applied to Shakespeare this may be unsurprising: the plays'

malleability, adaptability and capacity for accommodating a myriad-minded variety as well as resonating with the most diverse situations – all these seem to be broadly accepted. However, there is an important theoretical consequence too: it forecloses any notion of continuity or stability. Shakespeare as a concept is not only changing but is always different – and the fact that we can discuss him (or it?) is preconditioned by a plural view of what Shakespeare is and also on a certain level by a certain functional misunderstanding. With that in mind, to assume any kind of possession of Shakespeare that could be *appropriated* – however abstract and vague the concept of ownership and stability could be – is out of question. That also applies to any material continuity of a text: given that language keeps developing and so does the social episteme that understands the written word, the artefact of the Shakespearean text is substantially shifting and changing – even to the point that it may become entirely incomprehensible, opaque or irrelevant in the distant future.

If the existence of Shakespeare as an artefact is so dependent on the social episteme – the ability to speak a language, the reality of living in a particular culture with its own values, aspirations and politics, the will to appreciate Shakespeare at all – then we need to draw the consequences of this recognition for the concepts we are using in understanding it. Terence Hawkes argued for *presentist* understanding of Shakespeare – an interesting concept, uncannily reminiscent of the early phenomenologists (such as Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden or the Prague School).¹⁸ An interpretation – or rather *concretisation*, to use Felix Vodička's less charged concept – is always local (or homeostatic). However, that doesn't establish any theoretical basis for a narrowing of the work's scope – i.e. individual appropriations of Shakespeare say nothing about the semantics of the work but instantiate the work's *open* (hybrid) nature semiotically. In other words, there is no relation between any authorial intention as implicit in a text, and the concrete act of understanding. So every reading leaves the text intact but makes an aesthetic point of the work's generosity (or

pluralism). Individual readings are themselves conditioned by frameworks of understanding – such as we know what to expect of “Elizabethan” drama or of the nineteenth-century novel; these preconceptions anchor our judgment and understanding.¹⁹ In other words, the received social episteme is changing and recreating the object it sees.

3 “I thinke there be sixe Richmonds in the field”: Plurality of the Shakespearean Myth and Zich’s Theatre Theory

Translation and the plurality of available textual versions of a work complicates the theoretical problem. *Hamlet* exists in many editions and even more translations – and these translations are always different from any of the authorial versions. Cultural histories of translation show that individual translations establish their own cults or myths: they appear in a particular historical, cultural and personal moment and acquire unique momentum. So, for instance E. A. Saudek’s *Hamlet* was a phenomenon for the Czech culture of the 1940s and 1950s; in the cultural as well as individual memories of people who grew up with it is bears a unique *signature* that roots it in the particular moment in history. The following translation of 1959 by Zdeněk Urbánek initiated a new generation, with its own unique signature moment – defining itself in some way in opposition to the previous generation, represented by Saudek’s *Hamlet* as a world view. These two works of art are not only Shakespeare translations but even more importantly autonomous signature articulations of a generational cultural episteme, facilitated by means of the metaphorical openness of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. It is worth pointing out that the two translations differ greatly although both Saudek and Urbánek attempted faithful renditions. From the perspective of the two *Hamlets*’ signature moments, it is irrelevant that there are mistakes and translation errors in both; they built their own myths and even cults autonomously as well as on the “borrowed sheen” of Shakespeare’s cultural dominance and a certain amount of functional misunderstanding.²⁰ The work in question

(*Hamlet* in this case) is constitutive of the social construction of reality – always dependent on the version that mediates the work.

The socially shared myth is not a critical version of the work but fuzzy common knowledge (and ignorance) that constitutes an awareness of culture – such as *Hamlet* that means something different to everyone as it is based on different translations, different productions (some of them radically departing from the canonical text), or even based on merely received ideas of what *Hamlet* is about. Such examples of uncritical cultural myths abound: from the general belief that there is a balcony in *Romeo and Juliet* (“But soft, what light through yonder *window* breaks”) to very culture-specific assumptions of how certain plays are done or – outside of the Shakespearean cult – assumptions about famous operas and the “only correct” way of performing them – a myth propagated, for instance, in Wagnerian clans. Individual manifestations of the Shakespearean myth – in published translations, in theatre performances and even in adaptations and appropriations – all of them have their signature moment that captures the cultural, historical or personal momentum, and that is the only meaning that is available at any given instant. These signature texts may start their own new myths, often diverging in a Tower of Babel fashion from what has preceded them, and in with their own autonomous existence contribute to the pluralistic body of the myths they replicate.

The plurality of the Shakespearean myth manifests itself clearly in the theatre. Theatre plays are written to be performed – and as Zich argued, it is only theatrical performance that the art work comes into actual existence. As plays they also inherently anticipate the creative contribution from other agents – actors, directors, scenographers, translators, dramaturgs and the entire production team. However common such a view is, it is disrespectful and unethical to perceive their creative contributions as in any way secondary or merely interpretive; all participants in a theatre production may realize their role fully (whether artistic or not) and

without detriment to others. They work together on individual components of the production towards a synthesis in the outcome. In respect of the play, even if a production cuts long stretches of the dialogue and modifies the material, no harm is done to the literary text as printed in the book; in the creative process of making the theatre production, a new art work (a theatre performance) comes into existence – autonomous, with its own signature moment, and with a unique setup for an aesthetic appreciation. As part of the critical assessment it is unlikely that the reviewer or critic will consider the quality of Shakespeare's play but will focus on the roles that created the new art work. To what extent the spectator will base her or his judgment on the emotional and intellectual memory of reading Shakespeare – and to what extent she or he will expect the production to agree with it – is a matter of the theatre's situation culturally, institutionally and historically, and also of the spectator's individual expectations. None of these have any firm connection with Shakespeare as a text but everything in common with the myth that has been created within the culture.

The plurality of the Shakespearean myth is complex in other way too. Václav Havel's play *Odcházení* (Leaving, 2007) is a Shakespeare adaptation as much as a Chekhov adaptation. The connections with *King Lear* and *The Cherry Orchard* are not only on the level of its overall concept but there are important motivations from individual characters of the play: the protagonist Klein in particular is a narcissist who would love to fashion himself as a classical hero, be it a King Lear or a Ranevskaya (or perhaps a Gayev). The textuality of these adaptive and self-adaptive tricks within the play is complicated by that fact that Havel is not citing Shakespeare (or Chekhov) in the original but in a modern Czech translation, which necessarily fails to lend itself to immediate identification. On yet another level – one that should not be disregarded – Havel himself, as a public intellectual, an experienced politician and self-fashioner, comes into the equation of the Shakespearean and Chekhovian adaptation. Not having written a play for decades, *Odcházení* was a much awaited and critically

scrutinized work, and Havel had good reasons to bring in self-irony into this somewhat autobiographical piece. He also played a safe card by planting his new play into the thriving and much followed cultural business of Shakespearean adaptation.

From a critical perspective it would be mistaken to read Havel's play through the prism of adaptation or appropriation exclusively; that would deny the play its autonomy as a self-standing work of art. It does not necessitate the cultural hegemony of Shakespeare or of Chekhov for its meaning; it uses them as ingredients not as cultural monuments to be exploited. The Shakespearean myth and the Chekhovian myth have gained new signature manifestations in Havel's play and also in his own film of the play. These new bodies not only add to the plurality of the two myths but also stand independently as part of Havel's own work. In summary, a new art work represents a creative cultural intervention into the episteme of each particular moment in which it is consumed (in reading, viewing, watching or even indirectly in discussing it); it offers and assumes a number of dialectical relationships (such as recognized appropriations and adaptations, topical allusions or autobiographical projections) and in so doing sets the stage for the *myriad-minded* cultural forum inspired by Shakespeare and other cultural verticals.

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¹ Stephen Greenblatt, "General Introduction", in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 1997), 1.

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- ² Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin, "Introduction: Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation", in *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, ed. Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (Palgrave, 2014), 4.
- ³ Douglas Lanier, "Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value", in *ibid.*, 27.
- ⁴ Graham Holderness, "'Dressing Old Words New': Shakespeare, Science, and Appropriation", in *Borrowers and Lenders* 1.2 (Fall/Winter 2005), 1.
- ⁵ Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 9.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁷ M. J. Kidnie, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2009), 6.
- ⁸ W. B. Worthen, "Texts, Tools, and Technologies of Performance: A Quip Modest, in Response to R. A. Foakes", *Shakespeare* 2.2 (2006), 209, 211.
- ⁹ Otakar Zich, *Estetika dramatického umění* (The Aesthetics of Dramatic Art; Praha: Melantrich, 1931). Jiří Veltruský, *Drama as Theatre* (Lisse: Peter de Ridder Press, 1977). Jiří Veltruský, *An Approach to the Semiotics of Theatre*, ed. Jarmila F. Veltruský and Tomáš Hoskovec (Brno: Masaryk University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁰ Otakar Zich, *Ibid.*, 22. (Translated by Tomáš Kačer and Pavel Drábek.)
- ¹¹ Kidnie, *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹² Christy Desmet, "Recognizing Shakespeare, Rethinking Fidelity: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Appropriation", in Huang and Rivlin (2014), 41-57.
- ¹³ Margreta de Grazia, "Doth any here know me?", a review of Brian Vickers, *The One "King Lear"* (2016), *TLS* February 3, 2017. This was followed in the ensuing issues by numerous Letters to the Editor, from Brian Vickers (February 17, 2017), Peter W. M. Blayney, Stanley Wells, and Gabriel Egan (February 24, 2017). The debate indirectly continued with Brian Vickers, "Too Too Solid", a review of *The New Oxford Shakespeare* and *The Norton Shakespeare*, *TLS* April 21, 2017.
- ¹⁴ Kidnie, *Ibid.*, 9.
- ¹⁵ Desmet, *Ibid.*, 41.
- ¹⁶ Desmet, *Ibid.*, 55.
- ¹⁷ Jan Mukařovský, "Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value" (1936), in *Studie z estetiky* (Studies in Aesthetics; Praha: ODEON, 1966), 41. (Translated by Pavel Drábek.)
- ¹⁸ Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare in the Present* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁹ Peter Kirwan, in his *Shakespeare and the Idea of Apocrypha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), documents how the shifting notion of what is Shakespeare (and Shakespearean) has crucially conditioned the shape of the Shakespearean canon and what Shakespeare *ought* to be.

²⁰ For a cultural history of Czech translations of Shakespeare see Pavel Drábek, *České pokusy o Shakespeara* (Czech Attempts at Shakespeare; Brno: Větrné mlýny, 2012).

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